

DORA MILLER'S WONDER BALL.

BY LUCY LINCOLN MONTGOMERY.

THE pupils of Mrs. Croft's school were going in to dinner. Very dainty and trim they looked in their pretty winter dresses of garnet and blue and gay plaid; and very demurely they walked along the hall with Miss Bertram, the English governess, by their side. Yet, each, in passing, cast a shy look at a little figure crouching in a recess on the landing half-way down the stairs.

It was a girl about ten years of age, richly dressed in dark blue velvet, with a broad lace collar. She would have been a beautiful child, with her dark brown eyes and golden curls, had not a peevish, discontented expression spoiled the otherwise charming face.

Presently Mademoiselle Flor came down, took the little girl's hand, and led her into the dining-room to a seat between the stately Mrs. Croft and Bertha Cray, one of the scholars.

It was a large, sunny room, and the girls seemed cheery and happy, chatting quietly with one another and the teachers—all but the little lady with sunny curls and the blue velvet dress. She "gloomed by herself apart," and if looked at or spoken to would cast down her eyes and pout.

Dora Miller—that was her name—was the daughter of a Canadian gentleman whose business took him to Winnipeg for the winter. Dora had been ill all the previous summer, and the doctor said, decidedly, she must not face the rigor of a Manitoba winter. So her parents decided to leave her with Mrs. Croft, an old friend; not as a pupil, for they thought her too delicate to study, but as a privileged boarder, hoping the judicious care of Mrs. Croft and the companionship of the girls would help to overcome the petted, babyish ways into which she had fallen during her long illness.

It was now the end of February, and she had been there two months; yet she was as far from friendly with these twelve charming girls as she was the first day she came, when she had slapped little Kitty Allen's hand, as Kitty held it out to her in kindly child fashion. She stood in awe of Mrs. Croft and the other teachers, but she quite ignored the scholars, and would have been altogether unhappy but for two friends she had made in her own odd way.

These were Maggie, the pantry-girl, and Mrs. Croft's aunt, Fraulein Meyer, an old German lady.

Maggie had red hair, and no personal attractions to recommend her; but from the first she had conceived a violent fancy for the aristocratic little beauty, and attacked her most vulnerable point,—her appetite,—hiding away sweetmeats and bits of cake wherewith to tempt her, till, finally, the oddly assorted pair were on terms of tolerable intimacy.

The one thing Dora objected to in Maggie was her fondness for peppermint drops, and her frequent enjoyment of this luxury in the little girl's presence marred the otherwise comfortable hours Dora spent with her, for Dora detested peppermints, though, in view of the daily dainties reserved for her, she did not like to tell her friend so.

On this particular day, when dinner was over, Dora slipped out shyly behind the others, and as they dispersed to their various duties, she tripped up the stairs, along a hall, up another flight, and knocked at a door on the right hand.

"Come in, my little Dora," said a sweet voice, and the child entered.

Such a lovely room it was! One might easily imagine she had suddenly stepped from bleak, northern winter into a sunny, southern clime. One whole side of the large room was glass, in great panes, across the lower halves of which extended shelves full of blooming plants, while from above graceful vines drooped and trailed and clambered, spreading their luxuriant growth across the walls adjoining. An immense globe of goldfish stood amid the greenery, while gay-colored birds, singing and twittering, flitted in and out among the foliage.

The ceiling was light blue, the walls buff, the furniture quaint and rich, and on the floor lay a thick, luxurious carpet.

The afternoon sunshine, stealing through interlacing leaves, made a warm and golden light in the room. Amid this sunny warmth and fragrance, in a high-backed rocking-chair, sat a little old lady, who seemed scarcely taller than Dora herself. She wore a black silk dress shot with satin, a plain white neckerchief, and a cap with a border of frilled lace.

There was a rare, sweet charm in the gentle old face, and a quick-reaching sympathy in the kindly heart of Fraulein Meyer. There must have been

also some subtle magnetism in the quaint, golden room, for little Dora Miller's face changed as she came in and stood by the gentle lady's chair; the peevish, sullen look faded into one wistful and earnest, and the large, dark, restless eyes looked lovingly into the quiet blue ones.

"How goes life with thee, little Dora?" she asked. "Have you had a happy day?"

"No, Fraulein," replied Dora.

"Have you not tried to be friendly with your companions?" asked the old lady.

"No," said the child, somewhat defiantly. "There is not one who likes me. Big Mary Ashcroft makes faces, and the others laugh. They all hate me and I hate them."

The Fraulein knew that a morbid imagination and the habit of brooding over fancied slights often made the little girl unhappy. They had many a talk together, yet Dora persistently refused to believe herself mistaken as to the deep-rooted dislike of all the girls toward her.

"You think yourself of too much consequence, little Dora Miller," said the old lady, somewhat sharply. "Your pride must be conquered either by some severe lesson or by ——"

"What?" questioned Dora timidly, as Fraulein Meyer paused, for there was a pained look on the sweet old face.

"By love," was the quiet answer; and then she shut her eyes and seemed to be thinking, while Dora, with a little stirring of her dormant conscience, lay down upon a soft rug, and felt the sun-shine creeping over her and soothing her till at length she fell asleep.

When she slowly came to consciousness it was nearly dark, and she had a dim idea of hearing some one talking with her old friend, though she could see no one. She rose and went to the door, and then Fraulein came toward her from behind a tall oleander.

There was some one else in there among the plants, hidden in the shadow. Dora little knew what a center of influence to every one in the house was this beautiful, flower-shadowed, upper chamber, and how many came for counsel and help to the dear old lady whose life was so nearly ended.

The tender face looked pale and sad in this half-light, as she kissed the child and came to the door with her.

Something was shining in her hand,—rose-colored and gold it looked, flashing and sparkling even in this dim, wan light.

She smiled as she saw Dora's look of curiosity, and said, showing it to her, "This little vinaigrette came to me in my first Wonder Ball, more than eighty years ago."

"Wonder Ball?" repeated Dora.

"Ah, that is one of our dear, beautiful German customs," said the old lady warmly. "The little girls, to encourage them to learn to knit, receive all manner of lovely and curious gifts, wrapped in bright paper, and wound into yarn balls. They must knit until they come to the gift. Oh, the eagerness, the fascination, the delight of those treasures earned by the patient fingers! They are among the best memories of my happy childhood."

A warm color came into the old face, and the voice trembled with deep feeling at this remembrance of the dear old Fatherland.

Dora, watching the points of light as she slowly turned the tiny vinaigrette in her hand, felt a sympathetic thrill of fascination as she listened to the Fraulein's story.

"I should be tempted to unwind without knitting," she said smiling; then, throwing her arms about the dear old lady, she added earnestly, "Ah, if I had been a little German girl I might have learned something—indeed, I think I would."

"When comes your birthday, little Dora?" asked the Fraulein, abruptly.

"The —th of April. It will be Easter Monday this year," replied Dora.

The Fraulein looked steadily at her. A thought had come to the kindly heart, and in that moment it grew into a settled purpose; but she only kissed the little girl again, and, bidding her good-night, closed the door upon her.

Not long after this, a subtle indefinable something began to manifest itself at Croft House. There was something in the air; and it was growing tangible, too, for the girls would whisper together, and could be seen jotting down notes at the oddest times. One would cry, "Give me a rhyme for ——"; and another, "I've hit on something!"

Dora Miller felt that she was quite shut out from the happy understanding that appeared to exist among the other girls. They seemed more kindly disposed toward her than ever before, however, and for the first time, she now began to long for the happy friendships of these merry lasses, and to be a little ashamed of her own rude words and actions; but as yet there was no outward token of the change.

Maggie, the pantry-girl, was under this strange spell, too, whatever it was. More than once, as Dora suddenly appeared, she thrust a crumpled paper under a dish-cover, and helped herself freely to peppermints to cover her confusion.

In the old Fraulein's room was ever the same calm, serene atmosphere; and Dora loved it bet-

ter and better, getting daily more than she knew from her saintly old friend.

So the weeks went by till Easter Sunday came. On the afternoon of that day, Dora went to bed with a sick headache, and Fraulein Meyer sent to her, in her darkened room, the quaint, little rose-colored and golden vinaigrette, with its pungent, aromatic odor.

Toward evening the pain ceased, and as she lay with the little gleaming bottle in her hand, turning it idly from side to side, it is not strange that her thoughts were full of that wonderful Wonder Ball that came to the Fraulein more than eighty years ago. Often, since that first time, she had heard its story in the golden gloaming of the old lady's room, and she thought it the most delightful thing that could ever have come to mortal little girl.

At length she fell asleep and woke suddenly, then slept again, and dreamed she had a Wonder Ball herself, a huge, irregular mound of yarn with gay-colored packages sticking out here and there in delightful prodigality.

Was she sleeping or waking? Was that daylight creeping in at the windows? And, oh, what was that great thing on the table, as large as her head, though not so shapely, clearly defined against the white wall?

Dora sprang out of bed and seized it eagerly. The dream must still be going on! No; she was awake, and it was a veritable Wonder Ball, wound with blue and white worsted, with the identical packages of her dream peering forth in gold and scarlet, pink and blue wrapping!

"Mein Herz!" exclaimed Dora, and was surprised to find that she did not go on speaking German. "Where did it come from?" Just then she saw a slip of paper pinned to one side. On it were these words:

"The teachers and scholars of Croft House unite
To give little Dora a birthday delight.
They pray she'll accept this queer Wonder Ball,
And, knitting, find tokens of love from us all."

Do you know how the ice goes out of the river in the spring? For weeks, soft airs and kindly sunshine work upon its frozen surface, weakening day by day its icy bands, till at length the huge mass breaks up suddenly, and goes floating, hurrying, tumbling out toward the ocean.

Something very like that happened in Dora Miller's heart that beautiful Easter morning. As she stood in the dining-room, a little later,—shyly grateful for her beautiful gift, and in timid tones thanking the kind friends for the undeserved delight,—the ugly passions of jealousy, mistrust, discontent, and hatred went hurrying and tumbling out of her heart, leaving a calm, sweet surface of

love and kindness. There was no room for anything but happiness and good-will with such a magic treasure in her trembling hands,—and the girls were so lovely to her, and seemed so glad of her happiness!

It was not very long before she was seated at the dear old Fraulein's feet, taking her first lesson in knitting.

Whoever wound the ball had been very lenient toward the lazy, dainty little fingers; for, after a few hours' work of loose knitting on large needles, out dropped a small, square box.

With eager fingers and sparkling eyes Dora opened it. On a bed of blue velvet lay a little gold thimble, and on a wee card tucked inside were these words in the beautiful, flowing handwriting of her mother's old friend, Mrs. Croft:

"This tiny thimble
Is Industry's symbol.
M. T. C."

So industrious and patient was she, that before she went to bed that night she had knit out another treasure—a scarlet strawberry with golden seeds and green stem, with these lines attached:

"Do not think you have a treat,
For this is not fit to eat.
Of emery and cashmere made,
And given you by Florence Wade."

Fraulein Meyer was duly thoughtful for the impetuous child, who would have made herself ill in her eagerness to unfold the treasures of her Wonder Ball, and she gave her only a few hours each day in which to labor in this wondrous mine for its stores of hidden joys.

The next thing she found was a flat package, wrapped in silver paper, with these words:

"Please accept from Mabel Snow,
This small court-plaster case;
A very useful thing 't will be
Should you cut your hands or face."

And then how her face burned with mortification when she next unwound and took from its covering of soft blue silk a beautiful charm that Mary Ashcroft had always worn on her watch chain—a little gold dove—Mary Ashcroft, who, Dora had said, "made faces at her," when I am very much afraid it was the other way!

Tears of shame and repentance came when she read Mary's words:

"T was my own. My father gave it
With the right to give or save it,
And my sovereign will and pleasure
Is to yield the hoarded treasure."

After a while there were longer stretches between the tempting packages, and the strips of blue and white Dora's fingers were fashioning into a tidy for her mother grew daily. There was often a pain in her shoulder, and the small hands were cramped with the unwonted labor; but she was getting to



DORA DISCOVERS THE FRAULEIN'S GIFT.

be a skillful little knitter, and had better rewards for her diligence than even the kindly gifts that dropped one by one from the windings of her Wonder Ball.

Miss Bertram's gift was a pearl-handled penknife, with these lines:

“ Miss Bertram presents,
With her kind compliments,
To little Miss Miller this knife;
And trusts it may prove
A sign of true love
And not be an emblem of
strife.”

Sadie Grant, a girl with a large mouth and freckles, of which she was humbly conscious, put in these words with a dainty needle-book of wine-colored satin:

“ This little needle-book,
So useful to a lady,
Was fashioned by the
hands
Of your homely friend,
poor Sadie!”

Olive Parker's contribution was an exquisite, tiny box of gilt-edged stationery, with Dora's monogram embossed in gilt. On the lid was written:

“ Pray accept this paper
And these envelopes,
With the best of wishes
And the kindest hopes.
OLIVE PARKER.”

Mademoiselle Flor, the lame French governess, inclosed a Russia leather card-case with a few loving words.

Then came a silver brooch, in the shape of a butterfly, with wings spread and delicately chased, with the inevitable rhyme which made half the fun of discovering each new gift:

“ Alice Hyde and Elsie Gray
Wish, on Dora's natal day,
Every blessing under heaven;
And they hope that for their sake
This little pin she 'll take
As gladly as 't is given.”

For some time a faint odor, not altogether pleasing, had greeted Dora's aristocratic nose. It became more and more apparent till, at length, the strands of worsted slipping from her ball, came to the last one, which held in place a green tissue-paper parcel tied with pink ribbon. She scarcely needed to open it to know its contents—seventeen great, flat, pink peppermints!

The soul of Dora's admirer, Maggie, the pantry-girl, found vent in these touching lines:

" mis miller has The Best of Christian
Wishes
from maggie as Washes up the Dishes.
17 Pepermints — maggie McBride."

What more touching proof of appreciation could Dora have given than to sacrifice herself as she did on the altar of politeness, by actually eating one of the detested peppermints before Maggie's admiring eyes?

Joanna Sweet, with a box of cachous, put in this rhyme:

" When one you eat
Think of J. Sweet."

The next was a folded bit of paper. At the top, in large letters, stood:

" I. O. U. GEORGIE CARTER."

Below appeared this effusion :

" I have n't a cent or a thing worth giving,
I 'm in debt to all the girls, as sure as you 're living;
But on next allowance day, when my money shall appear
Just present this paper and I 'll redeem it, dear."

With a sigh that the delights of this marvelous Wonder Ball were so nearly gone, Dora finally came to an oval parcel wrapped in gilt paper.

Jolly, clever Millie Eustace shall tell its contents in her own words :

" I thought meter and rhythm, blank verse and rhyme,
Were as far from my nature as Araby's clime.
Then imagine my rapture — while with pencil and paper
My school-mates are working — I find my small taper
Of genius is sending out its feeble, sickly gleams,
I pray your kind acceptance of this box of chocolate
creams ;
And then most humbly sign myself
Your truly, Millie Eustace.
Having no doubt you 'll laugh and say,
'Oh, what a silly goose 't is !'"

Dora Miller's heart had grown very tender and loving as, one by one, these precious tokens rewarded her patient fingers; but the eager fascination, the unspeakable delight, were nearly over. Only the heart of her Wonder Ball remained, and with nervous fingers and glowing cheeks Dora threw the final blue loop over her wooden needle and seized the last treasure.

Forth from its dainty wrapper came a tiny vinai-grette — the very counterpart of the old Fraulein's ! The golden green sunshine, flickering through the vine-shaded window, touched its crystal points of rose and gold, and sent them dancing and flashing on the wall beyond.

" That is the very best of all !" cried Dora, joyfully, as she threw her arms lovingly about the neck of her dear old friend.

